

# Leadership by training

Grooming future leaders is vital for ensuring the long-term well-being and success of a company. Here's how one conglomerate does it.

By EUGENE NG

It is no understatement that the world needs leaders. Across the board in every field, industry and organisation, any recipe that is to be cooked up successfully needs that particular someone to show the way and steer the ship in the right direction.

Things in the corporate world today are no different. Any corporation that hopes to succeed in its pursuits and endeavours requires a leader with a vision in order to achieve its goals. And this vision, if viewed with wisdom, will include the belief that it isn't just sales strategies, marketing plans and high-profitability that determines the success stories from the ones that fail; it is people, the human asset of a company that is the most important factor.

As Henry Ross Perot, the famous American industrialist, best known for seeking the office of President of the United States in 1992 and 1996 and the founder of Electronic Data Systems (1962) and Perot Systems (1988) once said: "Inventories can be managed, but people must be led".

In other words, leaders are always required. Please apply within.

The smart philosophy in business today during an age where Corporate Responsibility (CR) is playing a much bigger role in the way a corporation is run, is that CR shouldn't merely involve the concerns of the community at large. Employers these days are aware of their responsibility to ensure that their employees are given the opportunity to function and grow in an environment that allows them to blossom to their full potential.

One important aspect of this is in the area of grooming leaders for tomorrow. Success today will count for nothing if there is no tomorrow and the longevity of any company



will often depend on how things are run in the present.

One company in Malaysia is well aware of this. Sunway Group, a well-diversified conglomerate that grew from a small tin-mining company in 1974 into a multi-million dollar enterprise it is today with fingers in civil engineering, construction, trading, manufacturing, information technology, property development, healthcare, education, hospitality and leisure and entertainment, has established programmes within its corporate framework to develop leadership qualities amongst its staff.

Even from the stage of recruitment, selected fresh graduates are handpicked through a series of stringent tests and interviews, then earmarked for success with the company's Young High-Potential (Hi-Po) programme, which is designed to groom them to become the next leaders of the company.

The Hi-Po programme reviews employees based on a "3Ps" criteria - Performance, Personal Development and Project - designed to take them from executive level to managerial positions in two years.

"I started out in the Sunway Managerial Advancement for Recruitment Talent (SMART)," says Elisa Dass, assistant manager of PRePARE Career Services & Alumni Office (Student Services) at the Sunway University College.

"It was a two-year programme where we were made to learn many different things like internal auditing and strategic management. After that we were seconded to the company's subsidiaries and asked to

Group's founder and chairman Tan Sri Jeffrey Cheah.

- Free health screenings for special children from the Yayasan Salam Malaysia.
- Contributions and active participation in the Liver and Kidney Foundations. Cheah sits on the board of tTrustees.

### Socio-Economy

- Establishing a recycling project in 2003 which includes buy-back centres in the group's HQ and other subsidiaries and collaborations with Alam Flora and the Housing and Local Government Ministry.
- Management of security within the Sunway township. The company contributed RM600,000 to build a police station and provide two patrol vehicles and have trained 600 security personnel, 83 of which have been accorded full-fledged Auxiliary Police status.
- The Group's sports club, Kelab Sukan Sunway, contributed to and participated in relief efforts during the recent Johor floods.



Clockwise from top: Victor Soo, Nisha Latta and Elisa Dass

take up different projects within the Sunway Group. After all that, we were then put into the Hi-Po programme."

Everyone in the Hi-Po programme is assigned a mentor who acts as a personal guide to the individual.

"Personally, I have an issue with being stagnant in the workplace so I'm the sort of person that wishes to get to the next level every chance I get," says Victor Soo, a senior executive at the Sunway Medical Centre. "So the SMART and Hi-Po programmes were really good entry-level grounding that has set the stage for my future development."

But even for those not fast tracked to becoming leaders within Sunway Group through these established programmes are not ignored and have equal opportunities to develop. Take for example Nisha Latta, currently an executive in the company's Finance Shared Services Centre.

"I started out working in the member's relation department. But my current boss spotted my talent and felt I would do better elsewhere and so she brought me into the finance department. This transition has made a significant difference for me and I have learnt a lot in the process," she says.

"Trust me, it's very much a plus point to work for a company that cares and wishes to see you grow," says Dass. Soo wholeheartedly agrees: "It's definitely a BIG plus point."

As it stands, Dass is already slowly but surely realising her full potential after only four years in the company. She is currently leading a small team with the Sunway University College and hopes to become actively involved in the development of the nascent Sunway International School.

"I'm also lucky to have a really good boss who leads by example," says Dass. "She has been in the industry for 20 years and she is still really passionate about her work."

Agrees Nisha: "It's very important that we have good leaders at every level in the company. A good leader needs to know the people he or she is leading and the bosses at The Sunway Group know this: that they too need to earn the trust and respect of their subordinates."

It is no wonder then that Sunway Group ranked 6th in the 2007 Hewitt-Fortune-RBL Top Companies for Leadership - Asia Pacific, the



only Malaysian representative in that list. By their own admission too, the company has in recent years started to adopt multi-national corporation methods in the way it is run and one of the most telling result of this shift is the succession planning programmes which has now become fully entrenched in the company culture.

"I believe that the company is also going full steam ahead in formally establishing a mentoring programme and is in the process of setting it out in a charter," says Soo.

In many ways, all this simply boils down to the fact that Sunway Group has acknowledged and pinpointed where their most valuable assets lie. Perhaps they too are aware of that saying by Peter F. Drucker, writer, management consultant, university professor and accidental proponent of the concept of the "knowledge economy" (as opposed to 'political economy'): "Management is doing things right; leadership is doing the right things."

And on the balance of things, what then follows can only be right.

## Focus areas

BESIDES grooming tomorrow's leaders, Sunway Group's Corporate Responsibility activities fall under a three-pronged programme in the areas of education, healthcare and socio-economic activities:

### Education

- The establishing of the Sunway Education Trust Fund. Nearly RM40mill of Sunway University College profits have been pumped back to students in the form of scholarships.
- Job placement programmes for students with Down Syndrome, autism, hyperactivity, William Syndrome and ADHD at SMK Bandar Sunway.

### Healthcare

- A long-term vision to make all Sunway buildings smoke-free by mid-2009. This is a project that is close to the heart of Sunway

## Ranking good CR practices

THE inaugural StarBiz-ICR Malaysia Corporate Responsibility Awards, jointly organised by *The Star* and the Institute of Corporate Responsibility Malaysia and launched on Jan 25, seeks to recognise companies that demonstrate outstanding "corporate responsibility" (CR) practices that go beyond community and philanthropic activities.

The StarBiz-ICRM Awards will be an annual event that will rank public-listed companies according to how innovative, effective, and sustainable their CR programmes are. A panel of judges will compare and contrast the performance of these companies across sectors and over time.

The judging period ends in May.